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# University of Dayton, Ohio (url: <http://www.udayton.edu/index.php>)



## Everything Begins With Mary

**11.09.2009 | Catholic** In the 21 years the Rev. Johann Roten, S.M., has headed the International Marian Research Institute and Marian Library at the University of Dayton, he added thousands of items to the library, stepped up research about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and dramatically increased the institute's academic program.

Roten, who is stepping down as director of the institute did something else too — he took Mary digital and the Marian institute global.

"We have many different means to make Mary better known, more loved, better served," Roten said. "Our academic program, research and the library are the basis for what we do. Based on these wonderful tools, we transfer that information about Mary into an electronic means.

"The library is — and I don't think that I'm exaggerating — the most important, the most comprehensive one dedicated to Mary in the world," Roten said.

That electronic means is The Mary Page (url: <http://www.udayton.edu/mary>), established in 1996, which Roten said was "pretty early for a religious studies program to be on the Internet."

Now The Mary Page attracts around 360,000 visitors a year from all over the world and offers information on Mary in English, French, Spanish, Korean and Chinese. With more than 41,000 files on the Web site, and up to 4,000 added each year, Roten says the site is certainly the largest online repository of information on Mary in the world. ?

The Web presence is only one of the ways Roten's leadership has spurred the growth of the institute and library and given it a global, intercultural character. He says the most significant growth has been in the institute's academic program — the area that drew him to the University of Dayton in the first place.

Before coming to the institute, Roten served for 15 years as head of a secular Swiss teacher education institution and was familiar with both the U.S. and European academic systems. He was asked to come to the University specifically to build the institute's academic program, which drew only a handful of students, in spite of its affiliation with the Marian of Rome, the only other institute in the world dedicated to the study of Mary.

When he started, Roten said the institute had only three students — all men. This year, it has drawn 56 scholars, both men and women from all over the world to earn the degrees that will enable them to teach in religious studies and theology departments, and many will rise in the administrative ranks of the Catholic church.

"We were able to do this although we faced constant challenges in funding, in personnel and in somewhat lukewarm interest in Marian studies," he said. "I had the impression when I got here that it was a very ivory tower institution. I wanted to get people to recognize what a wonderful resource it is."

Roten said his strategy has been to shape the institute and library's study and collections to embrace many global cultures.

"It needed to be more culturally oriented to reach more people and to show the broader appeal that this woman Mary had through cultural expression," he said.

The institute's faculty and scholars research a wide range of topics about Mary, many of them in several different languages, he said. For example, there are ongoing research efforts to collect all of Pope Benedict XVI's references to Mary, to analyze Mary's place in popular media such as films and novels, and to survey all of the shrines to Mary around the world.

Roten and other institute scholars are often asked to research Marian questions and comment on controversial issues such as apparitions, as well as explore how religion shapes various cultures and how various cultures, in turn, shape religion.

At the heart of all of these efforts is the Marian Library, founded in 1943 and located on the seventh floor of the University's Rosh Library. When Roten became director in 1988, the library's collection was generally limited to religious books on Mary.

Roten reached out to gather other kinds of printed materials — scholarly and lay articles, prayer and Christmas cards, prints, postage stamps, even labels from wine bottles. He went beyond religious and theological sources and found rich material on Mary in non-theological journals such as medieval culture, music and sociology. The collection of printed material now includes about 75,000 books and up to 150,000 articles and pamphlets; he says it's the largest and most comprehensive collection in the world — larger even than the Vatican's.

Roten is internationally known for enlarging the library's collection of Nativity scenes, also called crèches, and making them more accessible to the public.

"Our emphasis on the Nativity was a conscious effort because the Nativity is the most visual way to talk about how God became visible to humankind through the birth of Jesus," Roten said. "It's also a way to show how Mary is portrayed in different social and cultural contexts."

In collecting more than 3,600 Nativities for the library, Roten became an internationally recognized authority on them. He's been interviewed about crèches by *The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and The Associated Press, among others.

The collection includes scenes that portray the Nativity in expansive European and Central American villages, intimate scenes in paper, bone, metal and wood from all over the world.

Roten will help unveil the library's latest additions at an open house Nov. 28, when more than 200 Nativities from a collection donated by an Australian woman will be on display during the Christmas season at Rosh Library.

To Roten, the most important growth of the collection has been intercultural, bringing in contemporary art and literature about Mary. Roten speaks English, French, German, Swiss-German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Latin and Greek. He ministers in Polish, Hungarian and Lithuanian in the nearby ethnic neighborhoods of Old North Dayton.

He spends several months every year traveling the world to deliver lectures on the study of Mary to lay and religious audiences. He's an internationally recognized expert on Mary on everything from apparitions to the Rosary.

Roten is now helping his successor, the Rev. François Rossier, S.M., make the transition to executive director of the institute and library. Rossier, who has worked and taught at the institute since 2002, will be formally installed as director in January.

Although Roten is stepping down from leadership of the institute and library, in his new role as director of research and special projects, he will stay involved in the art collection, have time for more research, and, of course, continue to collect crèches. ? ?

"Who is the ultimate embodiment of the Christian faith?" Roten asks. "It's Mary. Everything begins with her. It's because she said 'yes' that things begin to happen. The Nativity was possible only through the naked faith of Mary."

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